

## The Million Steps to Santiago

O

I hear the click-clack of hiking sticks on stone as pilgrims walk through the narrow Basque streets of Saint Jean Pied de Port. The others waiting with us in line at the Pilgrim's Office speak better French and wear expensive Under Armour and new hiking boots for the 500-mile walk to Santiago de Compostela, commonly referred to as "The Camino" or "The Way of Saint James." We come from all corners of the globe with one backpack apiece. I suspect most of us are seekers, perhaps a bit insane, willing to walk the length of Spain for varied reasons on this 11th-century pilgrim's route. We all seem to have something to purge or an impulse to follow. I'm escaping a life of chronic stress I've hid behind for years in order to face down outside expectations about "success" that have become my own. My unhappiness is not special or unique. To be honest, I'm not sure how this mystical journey might change that.

I watch the other pilgrims, feeling selfish bordering on competitive. I don't talk with the strangers. Instead, I wonder if Austin and I will find budget beds for the night. We meet a confident German man, an air traffic controller, at a café. His gray wispy hair flutters as he tells us it's going to rain tomorrow on the grueling sixteen-mile hike through the Pyrenees.

"But what's a little rain?" he says in a throaty accent, taking a drag on his cigarette. "You have rain gear, right?"

We don't. Austin and I did not plan or prepare for this journey. The decision to walk the Camino was last minute, a climactic ending to a year-long traveling honeymoon, but also a bid to extend what little was left of our savings. Austin is wearing a J.Crew collared shirt. I think about my Chaco sandals, the most suitable hiking shoes I brought, and pretend I don't hear the German man's forecast. This is one of many reasons why I won't sleep tonight.

We make it to Roncesvalles and find our first *albergue*, an enormous hostel for pilgrims. My leg muscles are on fire. My feet are numb. My sandals did not hold up well in the snowy pass. I slipped in some slush and almost tumbled down a steep hill. As Austin helped me up, an older man speaking French gave me a pack of tissues to wipe off the cold mud.

Austin, a history buff, says Hannibal crossed this section of the Pyrenees on elephants in 218 B.C. during the Second Punic War. Austin does *not* say that almost none of the 50,000+ soldiers and 38 elephants survived the return. Still, I fanaticize. If I had an elephant, today might have felt less like the longest day of my life.

In the communal bathroom, I note my sallow face in the foggy mirror, no traces of the smile from the morning's contagious excitement. I thought this pilgrimage was supposed to be inspiring, life changing. I am losing the war between reality and ideals already.

I take two Advil with breakfast so I can move. I smell wet earth, livestock, and fermenting hay as I walk through Basque villages made up of white houses with exposed rock corners. Stealing glances through a set of lace curtains with embroidered yellow pears, I wonder who lives on this faraway farm. Are they happy? Content caring for the land? Do they know secrets about how to live that I can only guess at? Or are these musings all a romantic dream of an outsider?

My toenails are bruised purple. I had tried wearing my mesh running shoes, only to discover they were too small after a year of carrying them, unused, in my backpack.

Joanina, a new German friend who is also in her twenties with honey-colored hair, talks with me and I forget my pain. I recognize her from the pilgrim's office.

"Are you proud to be American?" she says with caution and curiosity after a few hours. I imagine what stereotypes she might be conjuring: guns, war, ego. Then I remember these are similar to what

I have learned about her country.

"Are you proud to be German?" I say with equal caution and curiosity.

Joanina stops when we see a dead mole on the road. We put aside our nationalities and the heavy histories we carry. For now, we are only pilgrims, and borders are meaningless dividers. We place rocks in a circle around the carcass as a memorial before moving forward together.

95,169

*Why are baguettes so long and narrow?* I wonder, as I sit on a city bench with asphalt now under my feet. I see locals on the outskirts of Pamplona cradle the loaves under their arms wrapped in newspaper as they go from shop to shop. Their Pamplona is not Hemingway's Pamplona, nor mine. I see stone walls and vibrant buildings and bread, but no bulls.

I gnaw on a crusty baguette until my jaw aches and crumbs dot my lap.

120,103

No one knows the English name of the flower covering the landscape in billowy yellow blankets. They only know the name in Czech, German, Italian, and Hungarian. I pick some stems and press them between the pages of my journal. We think we see lavender fields in the distance.

"They're not lavender, just patches of sod covered in plastic tarps," says Michael from the Czech Republic. I notice how he looks at Joanina.

Austin does too. He flashes his crooked smile, then takes my hand in his.

As we climb a small mountain, we meet the first young American our age, Alexa from D.C. She drags her right leg, moving it forward with dramatic swings, slowly heaving her body upward on the dirt path.

Austin and I slow down.

"Are you okay?"

She pulls out her earbuds. "What?"

"Are you okay?"

No. She is not okay. She is miserable, in fact. But she is determined and stubborn. And this is supposed to be a *life changing experience*.

I go ahead with Joanina and Michael as Austin walks with Alexa to try and lift her spirits. He reports that her limp disappears when she gets talking.

The Camino is as much a mental challenge as it is a physical one. At times in my life, I have been Alexa. Careening myself into every hard thing I could experience, pushing myself to the limits until I burnt out to a crisp, depressed but "successful." It is hard to know when to stop, to evaluate the water I swim in, to listen to feelings, and to make the brave choice to respond accordingly, no matter what those around me are doing or saying.

When a pack of pilgrims pauses for a break near a lake where a German guy in a feathered fedora strums Green Day's "Time of Your Life" on a ukulele, Alexa refuses to stop with us. "I don't let myself have breaks" she says before disappearing from view.

148,843

Craig and I walk for five miles under the scorching sun on a dirt path carved through fields of swaying wheat. We talk about his dying father in Scotland and Hugh McDermott's influence on Scottish nationalism. Unlike some of the other Scottish pilgrims, he does not wear a kilt.

"What about the U.S.? What do people in your country think of the upcoming 2016 election?" he asks. But I don't have answers or explanations for the hateful rhetoric broadcasted as news.

Bob and Soohyung are a couple from Korea. Bob walked the Camino two years ago but couldn't stop thinking of Soohyung. As he walked into Santiago, he realized he wanted to marry her. They were married six months ago. Now he brings her back to see where and how he first fell in love with her.

We never eat alone anymore. Yesterday our group asked white-haired Spanish women in long dresses for restaurant recommendations. They set aside their brooms and leaned over their individual balconies to gossip in quick, hushed Spanish, then point us in the right direction.

Today, James from Florida invites us go to Mass in a cold cathedral in Los Arcos, where I cannot understand the rituals, secrets, or words reverberating off the stone walls and stained glass. Neil from England curses, laughs, then reminds the world there is no god. "What a load of rubbish."

I read the prayer of the pilgrims in the church pamphlet. I remain hopeful that there is something bigger, something that cares for souls seeking satisfaction and meaning, something keeping the leaves on the trees.

Bob and Soohyung cook a Korean meal in the communal kitchen. We are grateful for real food and hold our hot plates to our noses. We go around the long table and say why we are each walking the Camino:

"Saint James has work to do on me," says James, casting a look at Neil.

"I'm compelled," says Hal from Nashville. His wife, Kim, nods.

"To learn to not look back," says Joanina. "And to get over a bad relationship back home."

"To learn to live well with less," Austin says.

I gulp, preparing to articulate a feeling I have circled around for years. "To try and live a happy and successful life without sacrificing one over the other," I say aloud for the first time.

I notice that the disillusioned hostel worker who earlier told us her plans to sell the place is hiding behind the cracked door, listening.

280,205

A painful sun rash is taking over the left side of my body. But I can't complain since Neil's feet look like they have gone through a meat grinder. He covers his sores with "gaffer tape."

Hal asks if I am okay and squeezes my hand. His compassionate gesture makes my eyes water. Later, I see Martin run three miles back on the trail to find the young Swiss woman, Sheila, who hobbled all day and stopped every so often to put flowers in her hair. "The flowers make her happy," Martin says.

310,257

Today we see signs letting us know we are 571...570...569... and counting kilometers away from Santiago. The wind threatens to knock us over. There are bold letters painted on the curb: "WHY ARE YOU WALKING?" I confess, sometimes I don't remember the answer.

342,146

The mud in this part of Spain is red like tomato soup in the rain. I sob for the last two miles because my shoes give me blisters, begging me to give up. To distract me from this thinking, Kim tells me the long version of a story about a female Russian pilot during WWII so I can make it up a hill without slipping again. I realize in that moment she will be a lifelong friend.

376,791

I press a hot, fuzzy towel against my face in a hotel in Burgos. Austin made me laugh so hard that I peed my pants by saying things like: "Imagine a rushing waterfall...imagine the sound of a running river." My bladder is still adjusting to this exhausting physical routine.

I take three showers: two for necessity and one for fun. There are two automatic soap dispensers in the bathroom. I place my eager hands underneath them to hear the satisfying buzz and to scrub away lingering oils from our tapas dinner.

430,859

Castrojeréz has a ninth-century castle ruin guarding the top of a vibrant green hill like a fairytale. Off the cobblestone road, we relax at a bar and dip churros in viscous hot chocolate. As we dust sugar from our fingers, we meet Barbra, a middle-aged Austrian woman with cropped hair and toenails painted bubblegum pink peeking through her flip flops.

"I'm divorced and all," she says, "but I have much to be grateful for. I want to show my thanks for how good my life has been." She beams. Her three grown children can't believe she is here. But I can.

463,929

My body is stronger after two weeks of walking. I hike up the dreaded, steep Meseta plateau without taking a break. I stop when I reach the peak to look behind at the bright sunrise illuminating the winding road like a star dispelling long shadows over the valley. I'm reminded to look back at times to see how far I have come, instead of just fearing how far I have to go. I promise myself I will take this lesson home with me.

490,831

A four-foot tall nun wearing navy loafers ushers us into a dorm room with twelve beds. The sun-faded bedspreads are covered in pastel flowers and trimmed in thick lace. The nun invites us into a small group to share what we are learning on the Camino. I practice conjugating verbs in my head to say how grateful I am for the chance to learn from other people, but she never gets to me. I am too shy to interject, but I know the words. *Estoy agradecida*.

553,298

The Meseta section of the Camino is flat and unending. Some people are giving up and taking the bus. We walk in relentless rain on unbending Roman roads now only used by pilgrims. The original stones are still in place, covered in metallic green and blue lichen. They are the same color as the stains on my skin from the dyes seep-

ing from my jeans.

Neil and Elise from Denmark surprise everyone by taking a train ahead to León. "It's time to create my own Camino," Neil texts. We understand, but we miss them immediately.

The wind will not allow Sheila to keep flowers in her hair. I don't want to walk. I don't know what is real and swear I have passed the same stretch of waving grass again and again. At least I find a bathtub at the end of the day in a *casa rural*, courtesy of Hal and Kim, to let my wet hair rest against my bare skin without worrying about a line of people waiting outside the bathroom, or having to push a button every thirty seconds to get lukewarm water.

585,450

At night I hear others take turns hacking with the same cough I caught a week ago.

In León, I splurge and drop sixty euros on a super duty, polyamide poncho because I can't stand another day of chafing stiff jeans in the rain.

626,920

We walk on without Frida, the Swede in our group. The bottoms of her feet are bubbling with blisters; she cannot continue without a rest day. We reach our *albergue* for the night and talk about food to fill the void, but Frida appears thirty-minutes later. We shower her in hugs and wine because she is crazy and we would be crazy to leave her again.

667,865

There is a flood of new pilgrims in Astorga. I lay in a squeaky bed and listen as a woman from Mexico City and another from D.C. exchange courtesies I haven't heard in weeks:

"Do you want the bottom bunk?"

"Oh no, it's okay, you can have it if you want."

"No, really, I insist."

I wince, reliving the sensation of swollen bare feet on cold steel



rungs.

694,899

Crosses made of sticks and yarn line a chain-linked fence. Austin snaps a fallen tree limb to form a cross to place among the others. He has always been the more spiritual one.

We eat piles of homemade *paella* with twenty other pilgrims. Jae from Boston picks up a guitar and sings "Imagine" by the Beatles. The room knows the words to the chorus and sings together with gusto, as if we finally understand the lyrics.

728,495

Everyone places a rock symbolizing a burden at the base of the Cruz de Ferro, a momentous site for pilgrims. Sheila places a picture of her fiancé, who was killed in a car accident a year ago to the day, with a handful of wildflowers. Martin kneels at the cross, the pale slivered moon watching behind him in the dawn sky as he prays. I approach the cross with Austin and drop my rock I have carried since the beginning of the pilgrimage, the rock representing an old life of imbalance and unhappiness, onto the pile.

No one talks this morning.

859,859

Shiny boots line the shoe storage racks. New pilgrims wearing yellow tour bus jackets crowd the trail. I wait in line with unjustified contempt for half an hour to get a stamp on my pilgrim credential from the local church. I try to remember we all have our own Camino to walk.

"First day for you, too?" says a woman wearing a sun visor.

"Twenty-eighth."

991,410

We are sleeping in Lavacolla, where ancient pilgrims took ritual washes before entering Santiago. The roads are lined with eucalyptus trees that stand as if anticipating a procession. Santiago is over

the hill. I am happy for the Camino to end, but I'm sorry that it's over. I am afraid. I worry I have not learned what I came here to learn, or that I will get swept up in the same suffocating schedule and depression-inducing routines again when I return home. The degree of my change will not be clear until tested, faced with a different kind of challenge, the challenge of everyday life. But I trust my feet.

1,001,908

We gawk at the iconic gothic cathedral—which, we admit, is pretty gaudy—then hug each other and nearby friends with heavenly euphoria. Some pilgrims lift their backpacks above their heads with triumph. Michael kisses Joanina. Austin and I follow a string of others to the Pilgrim's Office to get our *compostela*, a completion certificate. Ming and Shin from Taiwan stand behind us in line. We haven't seen them for weeks. I show them a picture on my phone of me leaving Saint Jean Pied de Port before the hike up the Pyrenees with the two of them standing in the background. There are so few strangers now.

I cannot move an elbow during the pilgrim's Mass. The incense swings through the nave in the *botafumeiro*, sending smoke throughout the historic cathedral. I smile, closing my eyes to listen to a baritone sing a song I have never heard in a language I don't pretend to understand. Then I remember a beatitude written on a postcard given to me by a priest on the second day of the Camino: "Blessed are you, pilgrim, because you have discovered that the authentic Camino begins when it is completed."

I've got a ways to go.

